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THE WORK OF BELONGING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY IN REMOTE WORK: A CASE STUDY IN TELE-NURSING

Ella Hafermalz

The University of Sydney, ella.hafermalz@sydney.edu.au

Kai Riemer

The University of Sydney, kai.riemer@sydney.edu.au

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THE WORK OF BELONGING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY IN REMOTE WORK: A CASE STUDY IN TELE-NURSING

Research

Hafermalz, Ella, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, ella.hafermalz@sydney.edu.au

Riemer, Kai, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia, kai.riemer@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Remote workers are typically knowledge workers who work from home using ICT to coordinate and collaborate with their colleagues, clients and managers. While remote working has many advocates, it also has critics. A frequent concern is that remote workers will experience social isolation. In this case study we focus on what tele-health nurses who work from home do to overcome this issue. We draw on Goffman's (1959) theatre metaphor, in particular his four types of "communication out of character" as our theoretical lens for analysing interview data. We demonstrate that the ways in which nurses communicate with each other using ICTs corresponds with the ways in which stage performers use these forms of surreptitious communication to discuss and execute a performance. By further developing the "communication out of character" framework we derive a theory of how remote workers actively maintain belonging through technology. We show that what might look like peripheral, virtual "water cooler chat" actually builds belonging within the team, which in turn becomes a resource for the team's skilful performance of work itself. We contribute to Positive Organizational Scholarship in that we show how important functions of belonging in remote work can be facilitated with technology.

Keywords: Remote Working, Instant Messaging, Belonging, Abductive Research, Virtual Work

1 Introduction

Remote working denotes employees working for an organisation but away from the office – usually from home. This way of working offers the employee positive benefits such as temporal and spatial flexibility and makes employment accessible for those who live outside of capital cities, have caring responsibilities or a disability that makes travelling to or attending work difficult. While these benefits are well recognised, there is also a downside to remote work, in the social isolation that can accompany a daily routine of working by oneself. This issue of loneliness in distributed work is an emerging research issue that affects workers on both the home and office front (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015).

We note that remote work is distinctive due to the physical distance between colleagues. In the literature this distance is often portrayed as a "problem" (Baker, Moon, & Ward, 2006; Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Chauvet, 2010). In this paper however we take a more positive stance and move away from the "deficit-correcting" approach (Caza & Caza, 2008, p. 22) that often underpins research on remote work, towards a more nuanced understanding of how technologies are used to support positive experiences of social belonging in remote working contexts.

Secondly, IS scholars are interested in how ICT such as instant messaging offers opportunities for remote employees to connect and socialise (Malhotra & Majchrzak, 2005; Nunamaker Jr, Reinig, & Briggs, 2009; Sivunen, 2006). The function of such communication is however often associated with the "social" side of work while its role in the performance of tasks is downplayed. While it is acknowledged that a "social connection" is important, we look at how a construction of what we term *belonging* is important not only for a positive experience of work but also for work performance itself.

We utilise a case study of tele-nursing to investigate the following questions: "How is technology used to facilitate a social connection in remote work?" and "What is the role of this social connection in the

skilful performance of work?” Our intention here was to firstly emphasise the wellbeing of employees by focusing attention on their coping strategies and how they make sense of their working environment. Through our subsequent analysis we consider how these strategies and practices may prove important for the conduct of the work task itself. In this way our research challenges a conventional managerial approach that sees socialising as necessary for wellbeing but potentially detrimental to productivity. We raise this challenge through a process of abductive analysis (Dubois & Gadde, 2014), working with field data and the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) as our theoretical lens, to derive a model that theorises what we term the *work of belonging*.

We begin by introducing remote work. We then outline the case which focuses on a group of workers engaged in entirely remote tele-nursing work from their home offices. We continue by highlighting the issue of how these remote workers support one another in the performance of their work. We find that the “social” side of work cannot easily be divorced from communication related to work, in the way envisioned by company management. To make sense of this discovery we reach for Goffman’s little known work on *communication out of character*. We show how this lens helps us to understand the work of *belonging* in remote work and how it relates to the performance of work itself.

Through our analysis we extend Goffman’s (1959) theorising to propose that *communication out of character* relates to *the work of belonging through technology* with implications for both social cohesion and the performance of work itself. Our contribution is thus to show how the social side of work is not peripheral but an important resource for how work is conducted skilfully in a remote working context. We thus contribute to Positive Organizational Scholarship in that we show how processes and functions that we relate to *belonging* in remote work can be facilitated with technology.

2 Remote Work

Terms such as telework, virtual, distributed or remote work are used to describe alternative work contexts “away from the office”; yet the terms overlap and are often ill-defined (Bailey, Leonardi, & Barley, 2012). Since an in-depth literature analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, we denote as a “remote worker” an employee who works from home, or other locations away from a central office, most of the time (Fried & Heinemeier Hansson, 2013). Remote work is thus necessarily distributed, defined by physical distance, a reliance on ICT, reduced supervision, and being inter-connected with colleagues (Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). This distinguishes a remote worker from a freelancer who is autonomous or a teleworker who may work from home only occasionally (Bailey & Kurland, 2002).

Remote working requires work to be divided into discrete tasks that can be carried out spatially and temporally disconnected from a central office. As such remote work is a natural extension of approaches to modularize and compartmentalize work for efficient work allocation and coordination, such as Business Process Reengineering (Hammer & Champy, 2003). It has been argued that the interdependence of remote work needs to be carefully planned and modularized and that ICT plays a fundamental role in standardizing, distributing and coordinating tasks without loss in functionality (Mani, Srikanth, & Bharadwaj, 2014). Remote working has further been associated with the “results-only work environment” (Bernstein, 2014), where it is not important how (and therefore where) work gets done, provided subcomponents are produced such that they can be successfully reintegrated.

A sector that is well suited to both task-based and outcomes-based work organisation is call-centre work. Call centres often require 24-hour service and the calls themselves can mostly be independently executed. Due to its suitability for spatial and temporal distribution, call centre work is often outsourced and taken offshore (Ravishankar, 2015). When skilled domestic workers are required, the necessary technology is installed in people’s homes. The employee value proposition centres on autonomy and temporal and spatial flexibility in individual work processes (Bernstein, 2014). Working from home also offers employees access to work in cases of geographical remoteness or physical disability.

While these aspects and benefits of remote work are well recognised, there is also an acknowledgement that feelings of isolation can be a problem when working alone, and maintaining a sense of social

and organisational connection is a significant challenge in remote working arrangements (Fried & Heinemeier Hansson, 2013; Fritz, Narasimhan, & Rhee, 1997; Orlikowski, 1996; Staples, 2001). In existing literature, such issues are most often approached from the perspective of how technologies can assist in repairing deficits in trust and control. Conflict in virtual teams is a well-established research topic (Griffith & Neale, 2001; Hinds & Bailey, 2003) and the ways in which a social connection can help to remedy these barriers to collaboration and coordination is of interest to IS scholars (Bordetsky & Mark, 2000; Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008; Leonardi, 2014; Ravishankar, 2015).

While ICTs make remote work possible, they are also seen as largely deficient in repairing the problem of distance. From a managerial view, social aspects of remote work are often conceptualised as important but separate and ancillary to the actual task. In a manner similar to the Human Relations model of management (Miles, 1965), a social connection is considered desirable in that it improves commitment and trust in virtual teams minimising conflict while increasing loyalty and pro-social behaviour (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Strohmeier, 2013; Walton, 1985). The role of social connection is linked to productivity, but treated largely as separate from and an after-thought to the *doing* of work.

Remote work is thus in many ways based upon this separation of the “task” from the “social”. In discussion of remote work the focus is often on results and outcomes, while the social side of work is de-emphasised, meaning that it is possible to treat workers as discreet units who collaborate only in the service of task accomplishment. We problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013) this assumption in the context of our case study and consider “to what extent and in what manner do remote workers reconstruct the social in remote work?” When work is designed in such a way that there is no co-located social at all, how is the social reconstructed, if it comes into play at all?

The issue here is twofold – there is both the matter of how workers build a sense of occupational belonging, of maintaining a distinction between themselves and their clients, and secondly, the issue of, how do they come to understand themselves as members of the same team, when their team mates are as distant as their clients? We focus here on how technology is used by remote workers to construct and practice these distinctions in the service of social and professional belonging. Moreover, we show how the one (social) is inseparable from the other (professional).

3 A Case of Remote Tele-nursing Work

We investigate a case of remote work practices in a tele-nursing context utilising in-depth interviews in a health services firm in Australia, which we refer to as HealthOrg (names and identifying features have been changed to protect privacy).

3.1 Case Context: triaging via phone

One of HealthOrg’s divisions is contracted by the Australian federal government to provide a phone-based nurse triage service, which was built to reduce pressure on emergency services and is free to the public. Callers go through a triage process over the phone with a registered nurse who will advise the patient on whether they should remain at home, see a doctor, or go to the emergency department. Approximately 400 registered nurses with clinical experience work for the service. The work is conducted solely remotely, from each nurse’s home office. After initial co-located training, all contact with the organisation takes place via phone, email, and instant messaging. Nurses receive a setup comprised of computer, headset and phone system; video conferencing is rarely used except by managers.

Access to the nurses’ work context was facilitated by the organisation’s senior managers, who were interested in nurses’ views on working remotely and their use of a new software system guiding the triage process. Overall, twelve nurses and three managers were interviewed for this study. Given the focused nature of our study and the homogenous nature of the work tasks among the nurses this number was deemed sufficient. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with these employees over the phone. This arrangement suited our participants, as they were accustomed to discussing complex matters via the phone. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. A total of 16 hours of ma-

material was collected. Additional discussions with managers and a demonstration of the triaging software informed our understanding of the case context, which was instrumental in facilitating and making sense of conversations with nurses. The interviews were very candid, with participants offering rich accounts of and reflections on their activities, feelings, and practice.

Through this process we learned that triaging over the phone requires considerably different skills to those needed in hospital wards. Detailed visualisation of the caller's situation required enhanced listening skills and the capacity to "take charge" by using voice in a skilful manner. The work that went into figuring out this new way of nursing was significant, as was the challenge of dealing with setbacks and difficult calls. Nurses not only emphasised the stresses and challenges of the job but also regarding the use of technology in connecting with one another during shifts. Most would log on to an instant messaging group chat at the start of their shift to make "small talk" with their colleagues. While they would rarely meet in person fixed rosters allowed nurses to get to know each other online.

3.2 Methods and data analysis: an abductive research approach

Initial data screening revealed the importance of the instant messaging tool Office Communications Server (OCS) in providing the nurses with a dedicated channel for connecting and chatting with each other during their work shifts. OCS is an instant messaging system that integrates into Microsoft-based software applications. Its features enable instant messaging, file exchanges, voice or video calls and web-based conferences via a browser interface (Seeling, 2011). The nurses reported using primarily the instant messaging and screen sharing functionality. This enabled them to have conversations during their shifts and made it possible to see what another nurse was doing.

It became apparent that OCS was being used as a "back channel". Shared chat windows in which it was possible to exchange dialogue, pictures, and emoticons, were used to connect on a personal level, but on initial analysis of the case we found that this OCS chat also played an important yet subtle and complex role in organising the triaging work itself. At this point of our analysis we reached for Goffman's work to help us theorise the role of OCS use, as it has been used in IS literature previously to explore activities that relate to "front stage" and "back stage" communication.

After further reflexive iteration (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) between our case data and our close reading of Goffman, we noticed that the "front stage" and "backstage" dichotomy did not capture certain types of OCS use – for example, the messaging system was also used while nurses were *on* a call (so, were engaged in a "frontstage" performance *while* using "backstage" communication). We therefore read further into Goffman and found that his more nuanced work on *communication out of character* appeared to capture in more depth the ways in which nurses made use of ICTs, particularly OCS.

Guided by these insights, we subsequently employed theoretical coding and an abductive data analysis process, as outlined by Corley and Gioia (2013). Our emphasis in this analysis was thus on deriving useful concepts that captured "qualities that describe or explain a phenomenon of theoretical interest" (Corley & Gioia, 2013, p. 16) - in our case *communication out of character* in the skilful performance of tele-nurse triaging. Our coding and analysis integrated empirical and theoretical material to develop these concepts. Abductive research involves the "systematic combining" (Dubois & Gadde, 2002, 2014) of inductive and deductive approaches, and is therefore different from grounded theory (Corley, 2015), which aims to find truth "in" the data itself without any particular theory guiding the analysis.

The assumptions that underpin an abductive research process are that 1) research participants are "knowledgeable agents" who are able to reflect on their life-worlds and 2) that as researchers we can usefully combine understandings that emerge from the field with our own interpretations including the use of theoretical material and frameworks to further and develop new concepts that help us to achieve a fuller understanding of the research phenomenon (Corley & Gioia, 2013; Dubois & Gadde, 2002). We would further like to note that this research does not depend on large-scale cross-sectional data, but on theoretical generalising from in-depth analysis of data relevant to the phenomenon. In other words, we take interest in how nurses "go about constructing their experience and less on the number or frequency of measurable occurrences" (Corley & Gioia, 2013, p. 16).

Consequently, in drawing on existing literature the research process transitioned from inductive, where we considered the case as a whole, to an *abductive* (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), iterative process as we alternated between our observations and what we learned from Goffman. Through this iterative process of working with the data and with theory, we gained further insight into our case while at the same time extending Goffman's categories to reflect what we observed in our data. We translated the voice of the research participants into an abstracted level of theorising that combines our interpretations with prior scholarship (Corley & Gioia, 2013). True to our abductive approach, in the following section we introduce Goffman's work and iterate between his ideas and our analysis of the empirical material in deriving our own framework, which we present in full thereafter.

4 Analysis: Communication out of Character in Remote Work

Goffman (1959) uses the theatre stage as a metaphor for interaction in everyday life. When we interact with others we are “in character” and any interaction in life requires both an audience and team-mates with whom we can discuss the shared experience of the performance when we are “out of character”. His work thus provides a foundational framework for studying the social aspects of inter-personal interactions in general and the interdependent nature of teamwork more specifically.

A major conceptual contribution that has found traction in IS scholarship is Goffman's (1959, p. 66) notion of “Regions and Region Behaviour”. In general, the front region is where the performance takes place in relation to the audience. There may also be a back region or “backstage” where the “suppressed facts” of the front region can be aired (Goffman, 1959, p. 69). The backstage region is where the performance is “constructed, rehearsed and contradicted” (Orlikowski, 1996, p. 77). Goffman (1959, p. 70, emphasis added) offers the following description:

Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no one is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team, who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character.

A key element of the backstage region then is that performers are able to “step out of character” and, as a team, make sense of and improve their performance. While the conceptual device of regions is well-utilised in IS scholarship to consider how technologies create and serve as separate front stage and backstage spaces (Dennis, Rennecker, & Hansen, 2010; Jackson, 1999; Kelly & Noonan, 2008; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001), the role of the backstage as a place to be “out of character” and the wider implications of the in/out of character distinction, have not found wide application yet.

Our initial emphasis on the “backstage” aspects of instant messaging in our case study caused conceptual difficulties, because we found that while the nurses were using instant messaging to talk about their clients and their experiences, they also used instant messaging while taking a call. These scenarios are not easily explained by the temporal and spatial separation implied by the frontstage/backstage dichotomy. They are however related to an interchange between acting *in character* (as a nurse towards a patient) and *out of character* (as a colleague among colleagues). We therefore extended our analysis to consider how attention on types of *communication out of character* might provide understanding of the seeming fluidity of social and professional interaction as reported by our nurses.

Goffman (1959, p. 108) identifies four specific types of *communication out of character*. These are 1) treatment of the absent 2) staging talk 3) team collusion and 4) realigning actions. Each of these are types of communication “in which the performer engages and which convey information incompatible with the impression officially maintained during interaction” (Goffman, 1959, p. 108). Each type of *communication out of character* therefore involves some form of covert activity - communication of information that would spoil the “official” performance if the audience were to become aware of it. Yet, each is important in some way to the performance. From Goffman however we learn little about how and why these types of *communication out of character* are important to the performance.

Accordingly, with our abductive case study analysis we offer two contributions to theory. Firstly, we show how the framework of *communication out of character* allows us to understand how technology is used to facilitate complex social interaction in a remote work setting, and that this social interaction is entwined with the performance of work itself. Secondly, through combining Goffman's framework with our own insights we demonstrate that each type of *communication out of character* provides a particular *function* for the remote working team; these are 1) *coping* 2) *learning* 3) *plotting* and 4) *positioning*. We introduce a model that links these functions to a process of social and professional belonging, in which social cohesion and task performance are inherently linked in the *work of belonging*.

4.1 Treatment of the Absent: coping with difficult work situations

Treatment of the absent refers to how team members treat their absent audience. This communication occurs out of character before or after a performance, away from the audience. Goffman explains that when the audience leaves the performance space, or when a team of performers retreats backstage, they “very regularly derogate the audience in a way that is inconsistent with the face-to-face treatment” that is given to them (Goffman, 1959, p. 168). Common examples are sales staff imitating absent customers, or consultants referring to absent clients by uncomplimentary nicknames.

Goffman conceptualises this function as follows. Firstly, while praise of the absent is possible, derogation is more common, because “such derogation serves to maintain the solidarity of the team, demonstrating mutual regard at the expense of those absent and compensating, perhaps, for the loss of self-respect that may occur when the audience must be accorded accommodative face-to-face treatment” (Goffman, 1959, p. 169). Interestingly, such *treatment of the absent* is said to have little to do with “the ‘actual’ feelings of the performers” for the audience (Goffman, 1959, p. 173). Goffman (1959) argues that sharing an impression of the audience that is contrary to how one is expected to act in front of them brings the team closer: “solidarity” is built at the expense of the status quo.

We found evidence of this form of *communication out of character* in our tele-nursing case. The nurses reported using OCS to share stories about their clients, in particular “difficult” patients. They especially used uncomplimentary nicknames to refer to men who made sexually explicit phone calls to the service. While such calls could be very uncomfortable – a discomfort heightened by the intrusion such a calls make to the private setting of the home office – it was by derogating this absent audience in OCS exchanges that the nurses were able to restore a sense of normalcy and thereby better *cope* with these troublesome clients. Blair, a senior triage nurse, provides an example:

There's one we call...[nickname]... We know him. He used to ring up and if he hadn't spoken to you before he'd talk about his male appendage, shall I say, but once he got the message from you that you weren't going to put up with that nonsense when he hears your name or voice he hangs up immediately. Never says a word. So if any of us start getting those we're [on OCS] “oh, he's back.” So we don't mind because it helps our call times...we don't mind it. We sometimes get up to a dozen a night.

The nurses use a nickname to “derogate” the absent audience in OCS. The statement that “we don't mind it” would be unremarkable in a co-located office, but in the context of remote work it is a noteworthy response to a difficult situation, because it implies a sense of group cohesion and a shared understanding of the situation, followed by mockery. This reflects Goffman's analysis of building “solidarity”, which we refine by adding that *treatment of the absent* is important for what we term *coping*.

This *communication out of character* allows the nurses to share their discomfort and restore their sense of self-worth by laughing about problem callers with colleagues. The nurses thus find a positive aspect in what is otherwise an upsetting experience, in that it at least helps their call statistics. Instant messaging then provides the nurses with a safe space, hidden from the audience (and the managerial gaze) where they can share stories about their clients, in a way that does not threaten their performance as caring, professional nurses. As one nurse put it: “*the OCS is equivalent to bitching in the corner over a cuppa or a smoke [laughs]*”. In a remote working environment, the nurses had come to replace the lunchroom or water cooler with OCS chat windows. These windows acted as a “backstage” space for venting about their absent audience.

The nurses told us that these “water cooler conversations” were important to helping them to get on with their next call and in the task of conducting themselves professionally once more. In this way, instant messaging provided an important “backstage” space for *communicating out of character*, in a way that while seemingly peripheral to the work task, informed that task’s competent performance through the function of *coping* with the performance.

4.2 Staging Talk: learning the craft

“Staging talk” is a type of *communication out of character* that concerns the mechanics of a performance (Goffman, 1959, p. 173). It involves discussing how the performance was received, how it compares with past performances, what needs to change, how disruptions were dealt with and how they can be managed in the future, as well as an evaluation of the effectiveness of the stage setting and use of props (Goffman, 1959, p. 173). Sometimes referred to as “shop talk” or “gossip”, according to Goffman this is the most well-understood type of *communication out of character* (Goffman, 1959, p. 174). It again takes place in “backstage” spaces, away from the audience, before and/or after the performance and Goffman (1959) again links *staging talk* to the function of “collegial solidarity”.

In our case study we found evidence of *staging talk* taking place via two channels - firstly, OCS was again used to communicate *out of character* in this way. The nurses reported discussing how calls went in this space and offered each other tips. Several nurses explained that such “shop talk” might seem unimportant but it was actually associated with *learning*: “You learn a lot in chatting about what happened to people. It might seem like idle chatter but it's not actually.” We found that in the remote tele-nursing context, such “idle chatter” took place over OCS and over the phone, particularly when a less experienced nurse shared a call experience with a more experienced nurse, by listening in. This finding challenges a common assumption about remote work, as summarised by (Bailey & Kurland, 2002), which is that remote workers may suffer isolation because they miss out on office “gossip”.

Discussions about the details of how calls are staged also took place in training situations that involved the use of multiple technologies, firstly to achieve a shared experience of the performance of the call, and secondly to discuss the intricacies of the performance. Such interactions involved OCS, dual-line phones, and screen sharing software. The multi-modality of these sessions is highlighted here:

I'll send them a message on the OCS “hi, this is Blair, let me know when you're ready to log on, can you put yourself into coaching”, and then we connect and we chat on the phone for a while. [Trainees] listen to three of my calls, they have the ability to come in and listen sitting at their phone at their home. They can listen - they can also watch on their computer screen, because we share screens - to how I process the call. Then we'll come together again on the phone and I'll say “okay what did you think of that, what do you think of this,” that sort of thing and “do you understand why I did this, and do you understand why I did that”. We'll talk about policy procedure.

The nurses thus used technology to share a call experience so that the performance could be dissected, examined, and *learned* from. The conversational focus in these coaching sessions was on how the performance was received, what a skilful performance looked like, and how it could be improved.

While Goffman again links *staging talk* to the more general function of “solidarity”, we add a more nuanced understanding in proposing that out of character talk about the performance brings the team closer to each other by helping each performer in *learning* their character. In a remote working scenario, technologies are skilfully employed to assist this process. Calls are discussed over instant messaging, often in quite coded ways so as to protect the anonymity of their clients. Sometimes nurses would also “listen in” on each other’s calls in order to provide support and dissect what had happened. In our case study *staging talk* was here facilitated by multi-modal use of technologies to firstly construct a shared experience of a performance and to secondly scrutinize that performance. Through this analysis we propose that in addition to a more fundamental role of generating solidarity, the specific function of *staging talk* is *learning*.

4.3 Team Collusion: plotting progression of a work situation

The previous two types of *communication out of character* relate to team discussions that happen before or after a performance. These involve the “backstage” communications that have already been broadly applied in IS literature. However, *communication out of character* also happens *during* a performance. Consider the ways in which in any situation there is usually more than one channel of communication being used – both the “official” and “unofficial” versions of the situation are maintained at once. A prompter whispers forgotten lines to an actor; two teachers concur with a shared glance that the class should end; parents spell out a word to avoid giving the game away in front of their children. These are examples of how one actor helps another in deciding the course of action.

These *surreptitious communications* are examples of what Goffman terms “team collusion”, that is, “any collusive communication which is carefully conveyed in such a way as to cause no threat to the illusion that is being fostered by the audience” (Goffman, 1959, p. 175). Considering how collusive communication happens *during* a performance adds nuance to the concept of “frontstage” and “backstage”, because it shows that *communication out of character* need not be sealed off spatially or temporally from the performance.

This type of communication is not always intentional. In fact Goffman notes that “all of these forms of derisive collusion tend to arise almost involuntarily, through cues that are conveyed before they can be checked” (Goffman, 1959, p. 186). Goffman outlines that such communication is either intended to subtly plan the course of action or make fun of the situation. Either of these forms of *collusive communication* is challenging in remote work contexts that are entirely mediated by ICTs. Many communication technologies require intentional actions such as dialling or typing. It is therefore not easy to subtly communicate with one’s own team members while engaged in a professional performance.

Although the nurses in our case study outlined successful episodes that are clearly instances of *team collusion*, this strategy was equally portrayed as challenging in a remote environment. In a co-located nursing scenario, subtle glances between colleagues may offer feedback on the direction the performance takes. For nurses working remotely, this assistance was harder to give as in a remote work context it requires 1) skilful manipulation of several communication channels at once 2) the time required to either include another nurse in the call or to provide context without interrupting the call, and 3) a way of dealing with an influx of assistance from team members. These challenges were particularly difficult to manage under time pressure.

One way in which *team collusion* was important to the nurses was in the context of difficult calls. A call may become difficult either because the patient is harassing the nurse, or if the caller is in a life-threatening situation. In rare cases the caller’s specific situation reportedly triggered a reaction in the nurse related to their own prior personal trauma. In each of these scenarios, the nurse could feel isolated and anxious and could even experience a physical reaction that impeded the call process. In an emergency ward environment, nurses could subtly communicate *out of character* to direct action towards a safer path (a reassuring touch; a glance that calls over an experienced colleague; using code language to decide on a plan of action). On a call however, this experience of helplessness and struggle could go unrecognised, with the potential for the situation to escalate rapidly.

The difficulty in receiving real-time assistance while on such calls manifested in anticipatory anxiety amongst newer nurses. Eleanor for instance had almost resigned shortly after starting in the role because of the “dread” she began to feel before taking a call. Much of this anxiety stemmed from an early traumatic experience that differed from her previous experiences in a co-located office:

When I'd worked in an office environment with a call centre before, you hold up this little sign which says “help” - if you need help. So you need someone to come, and then they're there and they can help do things like call the police...but when you're remote, you need to do that online. So I had to start an OCS chat, while I'm talking to the caller trying to get details...there was something about this call which was - it just threw me. So I was trying to work the chat and I was having a lot of problems with it. I didn't know what was going on and I couldn't seem to get help and I needed to keep the guy on the phone and down

the bottom of my screen - because so many people were trying to talk to me to say “do you need help? Tell me the details” - their little chat boxes were just all lighting up down the bottom of the screen and everything was just going crazy on the screen. I felt really flustered.

In a remote working environment, it was harder both for Eleanor’s colleagues to know that assistance was required and whether or not someone had already stepped in to help. It was even more difficult for Eleanor to use surreptitious communication to secretly explain the situation and receive useful input on to how to proceed. While she had plenty of avenues for assistance *after* a performance, it was harder to collude regarding the appropriate path the performance should take while she was “on stage”.

We saw evidence of practices emerging to address these challenges. One nurse explained that she keeps an eye on other nurses’ call times as a way of checking if a colleague might need help: “*If they’re on a call what seems to be an inordinate amount of time we might message them and say are you okay, do you need help?*” This does not require the nurse who is engaged in a “performance” on a call to go “backstage”, rather these colleagues were using OCS as a *backchannel* to assist in shaping the performance while it was unfolding.

The role of *team collusion* that we have focused on here is the need to agree upon and plan actions in situ, without the “audience” realising that assistance has been sought. We therefore propose that *team collusion* serves the function of surreptitious, “on-stage” *plotting*, a form of collective planning about what course of action should be taken. The function of *plotting* is in this way particularly important in stressful or high-stakes situations, where advice and assistance are needed to sustain and execute a successful performance without the audience realising that something is askew.

While we did find examples of smoother executions of *plotting*, mostly amongst more experienced nurses, this form of communication, quite naturally done in a co-located environment, seemed to pose a challenge that many nurses found difficult to deal with in an ICT-mediated context. Hence, while we found evidence for this kind of communication it mostly showed up as a *problem*. During difficult calls, it is important for the nurses to keep the caller “on the line” and to be skilfully involved in keeping them safe. While occupied in this way, the nurses’ relative invisibility in a remote context meant they could feel isolated at a time when they most needed assistance with *plotting* their performance.

4.4 Realigning Actions: positioning oneself within the work context

While most *communication out of character* is hidden from the audience either by taking it to another space or by disguising the *backchannel* of communication, the “disclosive communication” associated with “realigning actions” is even more deliberately ambiguous (Goffman, 1959, p. 189). It occurs for example when “two members of an intimate society make themselves known to each other” (Goffman, 1959, p. 189), for example through a secret handshake. Subtle cues or signals are used here in “putting out feelers” to test the definition of the situation that is currently agreed upon and whether it might change. It is an “invitation” to increase or decrease formality or social distance. There is however usually a guarded aspect to this communication, such that the performer can claim to have “meant nothing” by the cautious gesture or comment, thus preserving the status quo.

One feature of this type of communication is “double-talk”, which “involves the kind of innuendo that can be conveyed by both sides and carried on for a sustained period of time” (Goffman, 1959, p. 191). While the previously outlined forms of collusive communication were aimed at concealing something from the audience, double-talk allows each performer to conceal something both from each other *and* themselves, “for by this technique communication may occur and yet neither participant need place himself in the hands of the other” (Goffman, 1959, p. 191).

According to Goffman, examples of these techniques include a subordinate and their superior speaking to one another or acting in such a way that reveals an intimacy incongruent to their supposed social distance, but in such a way that this intimacy can be easily denied, even to themselves. One example comes from a dramaturgical study of nurses in an operating theatre, where a disgruntled nurse was observed “slapping an instrument into a surgeon’s hand with a resounding crack” (Riley & Manias,

2005, p. 6). While the nurse was acting as if she could publicly deride the surgeon, the gesture could easily be denied as misconstrued with the usual social distance between the two parties preserved.

Realigning actions involve risky behaviour. Such communication is aimed at redefining the situation and changing future relationships and the course of action. Significant in such realignments is therefore the issue of power. Who gets to redefine the boundaries of a relationship or the definition of the situation is a political issue and much is at stake in initiating such an attempt, which accounts for the shrewd means by which such actions are deployed. Goffman's insight here is that such activity involves skilful subtleties of communication, both in and out of character. He explains that "whenever loyalties crosscut, a set of individuals may loudly form one pair of teams while quietly forming another" (Goffman, 1959, p. 194).

We found two main examples of *realigning actions* in our case study. The first involves nurses asserting their authority over patients while remaining ostensibly polite. The second kind of "double speak" was where nurses speak to their patients in such a way that will not irritate the patient while also satisfying a potential call reviewer who the nurse expects might listen in to the call during the monthly quality review process. We provide a brief example of each. When a nurse takes a call they are required to quickly ascertain whether the situation they are dealing with is life-threatening. All the nurses reported the challenge of assessing the severity of the situation without visual cues. To cope with this challenge, these nurses have learned to use their voices in a skilful way to "take charge" of the situation and elicit the necessary information from the patient. Henri explained how this involves a balancing act between being assertive and polite:

I used to say, "oh, excuse me, ah, ah..." – and they would just, kind of, keep going on. So I really needed to interrupt them and I do interrupt people now. I do definitely get what they call call control. So I just keep interrupting and saying, "I need to stop you there, now" - by using a clear, I guess, direct voice. Which still sounds caring.

This type of *communication out of character* is complex because it deals with a certain role ambiguity. The nurses are at once in an inferior and superior position to the patient, who is also a client to the company. The nurses must therefore officially come across as polite and caring with their *patients*. Yet, they also need to take control by interrupting their *clients* to conclude a call within a certain time. In other words, they need to position themselves vis-à-vis the caller in different roles in subtle yet distinct ways, to ensure that their performance "comes off" (Goffman, 1959) as both caring and efficient. Another form of "double talk" was aimed more explicitly at the nurses' own team. The nurses were mindful that calls might be reviewed and they were assessed on whether and how every question prompted by the computer system (the "guidelines") had been addressed. At the same time, they did not want to appear inattentive to the caller or ask questions that in their nature or repetition would come across as rude. Hence, in these situations the nurse at once has to speak to the audience and her own team. Blair described how she dealt with satisfying both demands at once:

...if you asked a question about a kid's temperature at the beginning of the whole process and suddenly a question popped up in what we call the guideline triage, about temperature, one way of satisfying the caller, which is not to make them feel stupid by asking that question again, and the reviewer, was to say "okay, now we've already discussed temperature, let's move on." That would be a way of addressing that question without acting an idiot and just getting that answer "I already told you he didn't have a temperature", that sort of reaction. It gave us the wiggle room...to deal with the guidelines.

These examples describe *communication out of character* firstly because the nurse is talking to her call reviewers and is therefore in "employee" mode rather than "nurse" mode – though she maintains both of these impressions at once. Secondly, the need for "call control" requires the nurses to assert themselves in relation to their clients as being "in control" – a strategy not familiar to many customer-service oriented interactions.

In both instances the nurse has to employ “double speak” to realign her *position* in terms of both roles at once. One nurse explained the importance of this as follows: “*sometimes you have to not deliberately be rude but sometimes you have to be a bit forceful...we need to redirect them so to speak.*” In that such *communication out of character* relates to how status and identity is deployed and negotiated in social interactions, we add to Goffman by theorising that *realigning actions* serve the function of *positioning* oneself within the work context vis-à-vis different audiences.

We found that such *positioning* primarily took place through tone of voice and verbal expression, in a way that is perhaps emphasised in a remote working environment because it is non-visual. The recording of calls added a further facet to this *positioning* work because it allowed one intended audience of the *realigning actions* to be temporally distant from the performance itself. This observation raises opportunities for further research, for example into how an understanding of technological surveillance influences *positioning* work in a performance that ostensibly is directed at one audience, with knowledge of the anticipated involvement of a second audience at a later time.

5 Discussion

In the above analysis we have shown how tele-nurses engage in surreptitious communications about their audience, their role, and the performance they are enacting. We have utilised Goffman’s (1959) four categories of *communication out of character* to make sense of how this talk *about* and *alongside* nursing work plays out in a virtual work environment. We now abstract these findings into a model that we anticipate has implications beyond the nursing context.

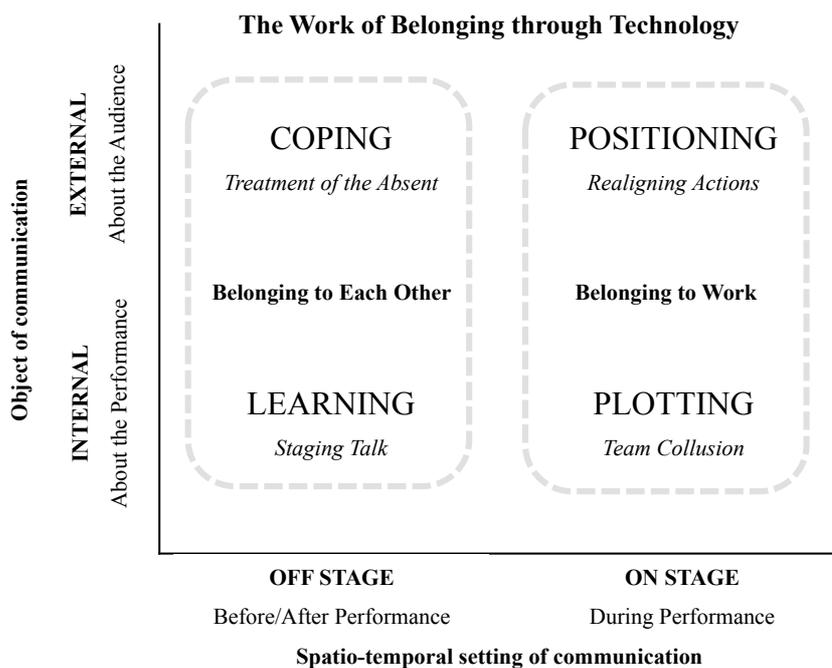


Figure 1. A Framework for Belonging through Technology

In Figure 1 we map the functions of *communication out of character* according to their spatio-temporal dimension (where and when they occur) and the focus of communication (the main orientation of the topic of conversation). We join these types of *communication out of character* and their individual functions with an overall dual purpose: 1) belonging to *each other* and 2) belonging to *work*. We find that the *totality* of these dimensions is involved in *the work of belonging through technology*.

We introduce the notion of *belonging* as an *outcome* of this study. We did initially theorise the nature of “belonging” to seek evidence of it. Rather we considered how the “social” was “reconstructed” in this distributed work context. In considering Goffman’s thesis that the group helps the individual to

sustain their character in the process of collective performance through *communication out of character*, we have come to an understanding of *the work of belonging through technology* in remote work.

We contribute to Goffman's work here in theorising that this process whereby one's character is sustained through collective performance defines *belonging* to a group. Through an abductive analysis we theorised that the way in which our case study participants came to be a team involved certain forms of "unofficial" communication that came to generate a resource of "team belonging" that was involved in the skilful performance of work. In this sense we propose that belonging itself requires *work* – it is an *active accomplishment* that requires ongoing attention, which we envision as a "virtuous cycle" (Chesbrough, 2006), whereby both *coping* and *learning*, as *work "on" the performance* serve to create a sense of collective identity by differentiating "us" from "them" (the audience), which contributes to a sense of *belonging to the team*. Belonging to the team then acts as a resource for *work "in" the performance*, where *plotting* and *positioning* assist the appropriate performance of the task in relation to the audience. Once a performance has taken place, the capacity to talk *about* it arises, therefore creating the opportunity for a continuation of the cycle that when taken as a whole, we argue, captures the *work of belonging*.

We find in this research that belonging is actively achieved and emerges as a by-product of *communication out of character*, which is an integral part of joint work performance by the team. In other words, we find that 1) belonging takes work that is achieved through informal communication, 2) belonging emerges from demarcating the group as different from another group, 3) belonging forms a resource that enables the skilful performance of the work task, and 4) belonging to the team requires both the work task and its audience as points of reference. In this way our framework shows that performing belonging and performing work are inter-connected; they are "two sides of the same coin".

We theorise that various forms of *communication out of character* have to be mobilised together in order to achieve both effective performance of work and to sustain belonging in remote contexts. We further provide evidence for how technology facilitates this belonging through channels that enable *communication out of character*. We have shown how unofficial, or informal communication in a remote working environment is centrally involved in *learning* the formally recognised work performance and in *coping* with its challenges. We have also shown how multiple technologies can be engaged in a way that enables remote workers to draw on their social belonging in order to skilfully perform their work tasks through *plotting* and *positioning*.

We also draw attention to how belonging requires demarcating and positioning vis-à-vis external stakeholders. It is therefore important for the team to have technologically facilitated channels of communication available to them that the audience is excluded from – both for the sake of belonging and for the sake of work performance. ICT-enabled remote work presents both challenges and opportunities here. Instant messaging for example is a useful "back channel" for increasing the complexity of a technologically mediated communication environment but juggling several channels simultaneously can be overwhelming for inexperienced workers. In response, new skills are required to cope with the complexity of managing surreptitious communication in ICT-enabled work environments.

In this case study research we have focused on a particular kind of remote worker – nurses. We recognise that many of the challenges our participants faced might be unique to their profession. This context has however proved rich in practical detail. In bringing out the voices of our research participants we learned of the significant *work* that goes into belonging, both to one another as a group and to an emergent professional role. In paying attention to this ongoing work and the involvement of a variety of ICTs in its accomplishment, we suggest that future studies of *belonging* in remote work would be well suited to a *process perspective* (Feldman et al., 2014; Kelly & Noonan, 2008), as this perspective attunes us to the work that goes into building and sustaining the dynamics of everyday life.

We further acknowledge that the work involved in *communication out of character* is *always* an important part of work performance, in both distributed and co-located settings. We have not attempted here to conduct a comparative study of these two settings. Rather, we argue that in co-located work settings the issues of connection that we explore in the paper are so common that they

are often not foregrounded, whereas in ICT-enabled work, they become troublesome and require explicit attention. As a result new skills have to emerge and evolve; it is here that *communication out of character* becomes an issue worthy of attention, as it has the potential to advance both our understanding of issues such as belonging in remote work and contributes to theories of ICT, particularly for the school of literature that conceptualises how technologies are shaped in and by *practice* (Riemer & Johnston, 2014; Riemer, Klein, & Frößler, 2007).

Our findings have practical and theoretical implications. From a practical perspective, we would argue that in light of our findings, management needs to give space to *communication out of character* that is not under managerial scrutiny. Informal communications play an important part in building the collective resource of belonging and this, we argue, is important for work performance. We therefore counter rationalistic, task-based managerial views which may seek to separate the notion of belonging, as it is understood in terms of *wellbeing*, from efficiency initiatives relating to *productivity*. We emphasise that following the argument we have presented here, *wellbeing* and *productivity* are strongly related forming two sides of the same coin.

Our study is circumscribed by certain design choices. We have followed an abductive process whereby our analysis was informed by the theoretical lens of Goffman's work, which presented as an appropriate way to make sense of our empirical material, because it has highlighted important issues and has inspired novel theorising. Due to the sensitive nature of information relating to health, we have not seen transcripts of the nurse's OCS interactions, nor have we been able to watch them in action. We have instead focused on their explanations and reflections and have carefully attended to the ways in which they make sense of their work.

6 Conclusion

With this research we contribute a better understanding of the nature of belonging in remote work – how it forms and the purpose it serves. For IS scholars researching remote work and virtual teams, our framework of *the work of belonging* can serve as a useful sensitising device. We suggest that in looking for the dynamics captured in this theoretical model, researchers are encouraged to consider multiple channels of communication and to investigate the function and meaning attributed by the research participants to the use of these channels. Rather than focus on one platform as “frontstage” and one as “backstage”, it may be more productive to investigate how these categories are materialised in action and what purpose such enactments serve for those involved.

From a Positive Organizational Scholarship perspective, our model highlights both the importance of belonging in remote work and suggests ways in which various technologies can be utilised in the process of constructing and drawing upon belonging as a positive organisational resource. In keeping with a POS view on how such positive influences can be developed (Caza & Caza, 2008), we open up a space for future research into how the processes and functions of *belonging through technology* can be facilitated and supported. Interestingly, we suggest that management intervention here should be considered cautiously – as we have shown that “backstage” spaces in particular are candid spaces where workers share views necessarily contrary to their “official” work persona. We therefore challenge future POS work to consider how seemingly “negative” expressions (for example, insulting customers in a private space) may actually contribute to positive overall outcomes such as social and professional belonging. In other words, the role of such communication should not simply be judged at a distance.

In this respect we join POS work that focuses on the possibilities of human organizing (Spreitzer, 2003). We do not necessarily advocate that our model of *belonging through technology* leads to managerial interventions, rather we suggest that this framework may lead to further IS research that is sensitive to the nuances and intricacies of organizational life, with an appreciation for how “work” and “life” inform one another. We wish to highlight the importance of *the work of belonging* in remote work both for wellbeing *and* work performance, as the two ought - we argue - to be considered together. In this way we contribute to a wider dialogue across the IS field about new ways of working and how technologies are being adopted and adapted to facilitate a positive experience in distributed work.

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